

## June 14, 1943, letter from Willis James to B.A. Botkin

**Fort Valley State College Fort Valley, Georgia June 14, 1943**

Dr. B. A. Botkin Assistant in Charge Archives of American Folk Song Library of Congress  
Washington, D. C.

Dear Dr. Botkin:

I am very pleased to find your letter awaiting my arrival here. I noted its contents with care and I am pleased to say I think I understand completely what you desire. I have not been able thus far to locate the diamond point needles which I used here in March, hence my hurried call to you for some more. Our recording machines here are not the best. It is one of the R. C. A. type without some of the refinements which ordinarily, would be used in making fine recordings; but I assure you that I will use utmost care in the management of the singers and get the best results possible with the equipment on hand.

The other needles were never in my charge. Lewis Jones had them and turned them over to Dr. Bond—at least that was the plan when I left Jones here with the needles. I have spoken to Dr. Bond about the matter. You may write to him directly.

Now as for places for doing the work. I will take the station wagon and go around in this community and contact various people whom I have in mind and see if I can inspire them to greater efforts in the making of some new war songs. I will also make trips to Columbus, Americus, and Macon with the same idea in mind. Buster Ezell, I understand, already has some new songs. He is in this community and I intend to go out to see him this afternoon. I shall undertake to do some preliminary coaching of all the people I am able to acquire for recording and in that way prepare them to make certain adjustments which I feel are necessary in order to bring out the words and soften up the accompaniment. It occurs to me also that it might be a good thing to have some participants sing without any

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accompaniment whatsoever in so far as this is in keeping with the great mass of Negro spontaneous singing. It also seems proper that a copy of the words should be placed with each recording so as to leave no doubt to what the words are as sung on the records.

Dr. Bond and I are of the opinion that Buster Ezell did not make the record, “ BOTTLE UP AND GO ”, but that a certain singer by the name of Chastain, made it. We are not certain about this and I will be able to verify same this afternoon. However, you are interested in having a better recording of it and I will set about this immediately.

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I was not altogether clear as to what you had reference to when you mentioned certain songs which I have recorded. Did you mean songs which are on records which you have there, or songs which you presume me to have? The only records that you have that I made are those made when Lewis Jones and I were here in March. You can get me straight on that immediately and I will be glad to work with you in any way that I can. I am very interested in this whole business of Negro songs and I shall be happy to give you and the Library of Congress the benefit of my experiences and musical ability in this field. I would like, as you suggested, to have the privilege of drawing up a list of the best titles to be salvaged and I can enter into a more complete and profitable relationship with you in this regard upon hearing from you about this in a more detailed manner.

Perhaps in days to come, if you can provide for my use a better recording machine, we may together do some interesting things. The Presto is a good machine, however, I have never owned one. Most of my work has been done without a machine at all. I have done this purposely because I wanted to live with the people and learn to sing the songs just as they do. Being a musician and composer, I can transcribe the songs quickly, yet I have studied the business of recording with our Physics Professor at Atlanta University and by experimentation. With these I combine my own musical tastes.

I shall appreciate a reply at your earliest convenience. With best wishes, I am

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Very sincerely yours, Willis Laurence James Willis Laurence James Visiting Professor of Music

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